



NEWS RELEASE

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

For release May 6, 1996

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BRINGING BACK THE BIRDS

They said it couldn't be done but more than 1,800 partners under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan are bringing back the birds.

The plan, an international agreement signed by the governments of the United States, Mexico, and Canada, was developed in the early 1980s when waterfowl populations plummeted to record lows. Wetlands crucial to the survival of waterfowl were becoming increasingly scarce. More than 50 percent of the United States' original 220 million acres of wetlands had been lost to agricultural, urban, and industrial expansion. Canada had experienced similar losses.

This loss of habitat, coupled with the fact that the remaining wetlands were literally drying up as a result of the prolonged droughts of the 1980s and early 1990s, put our waterfowl populations into a long downward spiral. From the 1970s to 1985, breeding populations of 10 North American duck species plunged an average of 31 percent. Particularly hard-hit were the northern pintail, down by 61 percent; the mallard, with a 52-percent drop; the American wigeon, which fell 41 percent; and the green-winged teal, down 34 percent.

On May 14, 1986, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and Canada's Minister of the Environment responded by signing the plan, focusing the energies of Canadian and U.S. scientists on 34 areas of major concern. The plan called for protecting, restoring, or enhancing wetlands to return waterfowl populations to the levels of the 1970s.

"The plan is a hallmark in conservation history," Mollie Beattie, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, observed. "It combines international cooperation in migratory bird and wetland habitat management with voluntary non-regulated public-private partnerships to get the job done."

The plan provides a blueprint for partners to design, fund, and implement projects addressing regional concerns and issues in light of international goals. Partnerships are open to Federal, state, and local government agencies; businesses; conservation organizations; private individuals--anyone who can donate time, money, goods, or services to help achieve the plan's goals.

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"Hunters and birdwatchers, developers and conservationists, private citizens and government officials got right to work developing projects as varied as the partnerships themselves," Beattie said. Partners have managed hundreds of projects across Canada, the United States, and Mexico, which signed the plan in 1994. They have contributed nearly \$900 million to protect, restore, and enhance 4.5 million acres of wetland habitats in the United States and Canada. More than 19 million acres in Mexican biosphere reserves are the subject of conservation education and management planning projects.

And the birds? In the 1970s, an average of 36.1 million breeding birds were found in the areas surveyed in Canada and the United States. After reaching a low of 25.1 million in 1985, breeding bird numbers were up to an estimated 35.9 million in 1995. Populations for 7 of the 10 principal species surveyed are now above the plan's goals.

While habitat availability is important in bringing back the birds, so is Mother Nature. "Following 10 years of sustained drought, the past 2 years of abundant rain and snow triggered a strong recovery in waterfowl. That recovery would not have happened without the millions of acres of habitat restored and conserved in the past decade," Beattie said. "The drought taught us we cannot always depend on good weather. If the recovery of duck populations is to continue, we must rededicate ourselves to habitat conservation efforts. Waterfowl must have plentiful habitat every year, regardless of weather.

"Rachel Carson's observation that animals, like people, need places to live is truer today than when she first made it nearly 50 years ago. Habitat protection is the key to conserving our Nation's wildlife heritage, whether that wildlife is endangered species, songbirds, or ducks and geese. If we can't protect habitat, we can't protect wildlife."

In this 10th anniversary year of the plan, partners across the continent are celebrating what they have accomplished, then it is back to the task at hand. "Nobody knows better than they that more work must be done to bring the birds back and keep them back," Beattie said.

For more information about the North American plan, write to the North American Waterfowl and Wetlands Office, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 110, Arlington, Virginia 22203.